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RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY LEAD TO THE SAME TRUTH

LETTER OF MAIMONIDES TO HIS DISCIPLE JOSEPH BEN JUDAH IBN AKNIN

Introduction

Letters to ibn Aknin by Maimonides are of special interest. They reflect an intimacy of historical experiences and philosophic discipline common only to an unusual relationship based on mutual understanding and respect. For ibn Aknin[1] was a trusted disciple to whom Maimonides referred to as his "son" and for whom he wrote his *magnum opus, Moreh Nebukhim.*[2]

Ibn Aknin was poet, physician, and philosopher, who found in Maimonides the teacher he needed. Drawing from a variety of disciplines, the young man gained scraps of knowledge of all sorts — he had studied the Bible, Hebrew literature, the Koran, poetry, medicine, philosophy and the fine arts. His difficulty was that he lacked an organized principle of life that would connect the fragments into a total frame. Maimonides cautioned him: "I perceived that you had acquired some knowledge in these matters from others and that you remained perplexed and bewildered. I urged you to desist from this pursuit and enjoined you to continue your studies systematically" (*The Guide,* Introduction).

Because of this lack of a central thesis, ibn Aknin found it difficult to harmonize the results of his philosophical research with the teachings of the Bible. In his early correspondence with his master he betrayed this conflict. He wrote an unusual allegorical letter which almost alienated him from his master. "Thy daughter Kimah (symbolic of Judaica) whom I loved and married according to the law and custom in the presence of two witnesses, Abd Allah and Ibn Rushd, proved unfaithful to me and followed other men. There must be something wrong in her education. Restore the wife to her husband, for he is a prophet." Maimonides replied in a similar allegorical style declaring the innocence of his daughter and the guilt of the husband who lacks faith and a well-organized, authentic knowledge of Jewish life and thought.

He subsequently advised him in *The Guide,* "My son, so long as you are engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and logic, you belong to those who go around about the palace in search of the gate. When you understand physics you have entered the hall, and when you master metaphysics you have entered the innermost palace."[3]

Manifestly the overriding instruction Maimonides attempted to convey to his pupil was to develop a central, all-illuminating core in his philosophy of Judaism which will enable him to incorporate categories from other disciplines without conflict or contradiction. He will then realize that philosophy and faith lead to the same truth, that God reveals Himself in man's reason and in His word and that religion to be operative must satisfy its intellectual as well as its moral necessities.

Joseph ibn Aknin was born in Ceuta, Morocco about 1160. In his early years he was exposed to the persecution of the Almohades and, like many of his fellow Jews, probably had to practice his Jewishness in private, especially when one wanted to pursue the medical profession. At the age of twenty-five, the situation for the Jews became intolerable and he left for Alexandria, where a close affinity developed between him and Maimonides. Ibn Aknin sent him his poems together with some other compositions reflecting his great longing for higher studies in Judaica and philosophy. To satisfy this desire even more he moved to Cairo where he studied logic and mathematics as well as Judaica under the personal direction of Maimonides for two years. Then he moved further East to Aleppo establishing himself and raising a family. The contact between master and pupil continued through correspondence culminating in the *Guide of the Perplexed* that Maimonides sent to him chapter by chapter in the form of epistles.

To his chagrin, however, he discovered that in the East, especially in Baghdad where the head of the community, Samuel ben Ali felt that his authority was challenged by the by the Code of Maimonides, there arose fierce opposition to his master. Calumnies and slanders were spread against him. He was accused of being ignorant and not a true follower of the Talmud. Consequently his claim of authority in Halakhah was challenged. Samuel ben Ali wrote a treatise on resurrection for the people of Yemen quoting from Aggadic, Midrashic and Moslem sources in order to appear a worthy rival of Maimonides and to undermine his writings and personal integrity.

Likewise from another source, from Aleppo, Mar Zecharia, a man with superficial knowledge of Talmud and believing himself eclipsed by Joseph ibn Aknin, worked with equal hostility against master and disciple. Ibn Aknin was irked by the mis-

representations and vilifications. Filled with a burning indignation against Maimonides' adversaries and spiteful fanatics, the disciple urged his master to strike back. Maimonides apparently did not share a similar feeling of vindictiveness. Instead Maimonides urged his disciple to concentrate on the positive affirmation of religion and philosophy and to follow the path of wisdom.

Notwithstanding their discrepancy of age and intellectual stature, Maimonides and Joseph ibn Aknin developed an intellectual kinship which blossomed into a "father and son" relationship. While not enamored by the student's poems which appear to have been lost except one in praise of the master,[4] Maimonides appreciated his all-consumming longing for higher studies and his zeal for squaring Biblical teaching with philosophical concepts. Before Maimonides wrote the *Guide,* ibn Aknin wrote a philosophic treatise on the nature of the Absolute, the derivation of all things from the Absolute and creatio-ex-nihilo.[5] He wrote also a psychological work *Tabb al-Nufus,* of which only some fragments have been published.[6]

The following letter which was written in Cairo in 1191 appears in different versions in various collections of Maimonides' letters both in Arabic and in Hebrew.[7] For this translation into English I have compared the various sources and attempted to discover a coherent format depicting only relevant passages. The first portion of this letter's translation appeared in the Spring Issue 1963 of *TRADITION.*

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With reference to the article,[8] I am wondering whether you sent it to convince me of the lack of knowledge of its author. Did you really think that I regarded him — or even anyone superior to him — as a perceptive scholar who has the capacity to probe a thing to its ultimate purpose. As the Lord knows, like other ostentatious preachers, he spouts idle and empty phrases, coupled with sarcastic and humorous remarks. It surely would have been wiser on his part to confine his remarks and proofs (for resurrection) to a consideration of the halakhic "prescribed hundred blessings"[9] and other benedictions recited when one beholds a Jewish graveyard.[10] But why should he indulge in metaphysical notions concerning the soul and other philosophical speculation and their validation. Apparently, in this respect he is similar to one superior to him who even fancied more whimsical delusions on the subject and whose work he used as a source for his fantastic notions.[11]

A similar correspondence from Yemen about this matter reached me to which I responded. But in that case there appeared to be a confusion about the difference between the notion of the world-to-come and the messianic period.[12]

With regard to the matter you mention about going to Baghdad, I have already sanctioned your plan to open there a house of learning where you wish to expound the Law with my Code[13] as a text book. I fear, however, that you will be constantly involved in disputes with those people and fail to achieve your proper objectives. Moreover, if you assume the practice of teaching, your business affairs will be neglected and you dare not accept any financial reward from them. It is far better for you to earn a single *drachma* as a weaver, tailor or carpenter than ot be dependent on the license of the Exilarch. If you dispute with any of them, you will lose your earning. And if you accept from them favors you will be humiliated. My advice to you is to pay full attention to your trade and the practice of medicine and at the same time continue to study the Torah voluntarily. This means to study only the halakhot of the "Rif" [Rabbi Isaac Alfasi] and compare them with my Codes.

Should you find any disagreements between the texts, it behooves you to go directly to the Talmud for relevant passages and you will discover the truth. Do not waste your time with the commentaries and casuistical explanations of obscure passages of the Gemara. I have abandoned those practices long ago as a waste of time and of little profit. May the Lord lead you in the right path.

Concerning my personal welfare I find comfort only in two things: In an ability to indulge in speculative investigation and, secondly, in blessed endowments vouchsafed unto my son, Abraham. Like his namesake, the patriarch, may he be sustained and granted long life. For he is most humble and unpretentious, excelling in unusual fine qualities of character, and imbued with an exemplary good nature and a sutble mind scintilating with innovative ideas. I am sure he will be held in high esteem by all people and I beseech the Almighty to watch over him and recompense him for his good deeds.

I have already notified you that the little daughter[14] passed

away, may the Lord grant that her death be an atonement for her. My son, I would enjoin you not to mourn or grieve at the demise of any individual male or female. As God knoweth and witnesseth, it is the truth which I expound, namely, that the notion of goodness applies only to the species of man according to the opinion of every intellectual. Manifestly, I do not speak here of absolute goodness but of a benign attribute that is conducive to mitigating grief and is more proper to the nature of the sublunar world. Thus, in accordance with Divine wisdom, it is incumbent upon us to focus the notion of goodness exclusively upon the permanent existence of the species of man rather than on the individual members of the species.[15] When you will receive the chapter in *The Guide* dealing with this matter, the subject will become clearer and more lucid, with the help of God.[16]

You undoubtedly know, my son, that the high positions of authority in government[17] that some of our people occupy in our day, I do not regard as a boon or as a stroke of good fortune. As a matter of fact, as God liveth, such positions are fraught with no little danger inasmuch as they are debilitative and exhausting. The perfect man who seeks ultimate success should focus his attention on the perfection of his own spiritual faculties and commitments and remain aloof from an activity that concomittantly provokes discreditable public opinion and indecent standards. For public rulership if carried out sincerely and strictly increases grief and may cause undue embarrassment at the hands of the pagans and even physical harm by police officers. On the other hand, should one bow to public pressures in order to please one's constituents, he will be guilty of bias and hypocrisy which is forbidden in the Torah as the prophet, the man of God, rebuked Eli the priest, in a similar situation "and why honorest thou my sons above me?" (I Sam. 2:29).

NOTES

1. Scholars differ as to the identification of Joseph ben Judah ibn Simon with Joseph ben Judah ibn Aknin. Baneth in his *Letters of Maimonides* (Jerus-

alem 1946), 1, 6, contests this identification as advanced by Steinschneider, (Ersch & Gruber, Encyc., Section 2 part 31. pp. 54 ff.) and finds his support in Munk ("Notice sur Joseph b. Jehudah" in *Jour. Asiatique* 1842, p. 14) and Nebauer, (*Monatschrift,* 1870, pp. 348 ff.).

2. In his dedicatory introduction to the *Guide* Maimonides wrote: "When by the will of God we parted and you went your way, our discussions aroused in me a resolution which had long been latent. Your absence has prompted me to compose this treatise for you and for those who are like you, however fine they may be. I have divided it into chapters, each of which shall be sent to you as soon as it is completed."

3. *Guide* 111:51.

4. See Maimonides, *Kobez,* ed. B. A. Lichtenberg, 11, 29, Leipsig, 1859.

5. While written in Arabic, the treatise is known only in the Hebrew translation, published by M. Levy, *Drei Abhandburgen,* Berlin, 1879.

6. Fragments of the work have been published by Guttmann in *Das Judishe Unterrichtswesen,* (Vienna, 1873).

7. *Iggerot U-tshuvot ha-Rambam,* published by Lewin-Epstein Bros. (Jerusalem); *Kobez, Teshubot ha-Rambam ve Iggerotov* — Ed. by B. A. Lichtenberg, Leipzig, 1859; *Moses Ben Maimon Epistulae* — Ed. by D. H. Baneth, Mekize Nirdamin, Jerusalem, 1946; *Iggerot* — Ed. Joseph Kafih, Masod Harav Kook, Jrusalem, 1972; *A Treasury of Jewish Letters* — Ed. by F. Kobler (J.P.S. 1954); *Brief des R. Moses ben Maimon an Seiner Junger Joseph B. Yehuda ibn Aknin* — Ubersetzt von Heinz Wolff, *MGWJ LXXIX,* 1935.

8. After arriving in Baghdad, Joseph ibn Aknin was exposed to the calumnies of the Baghdad Gaon, Samuel ben Ali, who prepared a treatise on bodily resurrection supported by Aggadic and Midrashic as well as Moslem philosophic passages designed against the "Heresies" of Maimonides. In this letter, Aknin enclosed a copy of Samuel's treatise on resurrection and asked him to reply to his assailant.

9. Reference here is to the liturgical passages of מחיה מתים and א־לוקי נשמה שנתת בי

10. Cf. *B. Tal. Berakhot* 58.

11. Baneth holds he referred to Saadia's Seventh chapter on Resurrection in *Emunot v'Deot.*

12. Maimonides distinguishes between the world to come and the Messianic age. The latter is not central but only the vestibule facilitating entrance to the *Olam-ha-ba.* The denouement of world history will be played out on the stage of the *Olam-ha-ba.* The Messianic era will witness no drastic changes in nature save the ushering in of a period of tranquility, giving man a chance to develop his potential for entrance to the *Olam-ha-ba.*

13. Aknin's intention of founding a school in Baghdad based on his master's work was to combat the influence of Samuel ben Ali.

14. Who was the "little daughter" that Maimonides had reference to? Obviously it could not refer to his own children since he had no daughters. By the same token, if it were Ibn Aknin's daughter, there would have been no need for Maimonides to convey this information to him. A clue to the identity of

the daughter may be drawn from a letter which he wrote to his friend in Acco, Rabbi Japhet ben Eliahu in 1176 wherein he states that upon the drowning of his brother David he took into his home the brother's widow with her daughter. Apparently, reference here is to his brother's daughter whom he raised as his own child.

15. Baneth in his *Iggerot* brings two readings of this paragraph, one of which is also found in the Kobez and in the Lewin-Epstein publication. Both versions, however, appear obscure unless reference is made, as I have attempted to do, to Maimonides' *The Guide* 111:12, and to his elucidation of the first cause of evil.

16. See *Guide* 111:12. Maimonides argues that inasmuch as genesis can take place only through destruction, hence we must assume that without the destruction of the individual members of the species, the species itself would not exist permanently.

17. He was probably referring to his own position as a physician to the Sultan and to a similar position that was being offered to Ibn Aknin in Allepo.

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